DOES THE CHURCH MATTER?
Matthew 28:16-20, Revelation 21:1-3
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

"To whom it may concern," the letter began. The date on it was November 5. It came across my desk Friday, after I had prepared the sermon for this morning. It contained a familiar lament..."The sheet titled budget summary came in the mail again, a sheet I have dreaded each year since I became aware of the dollars and cents of the church..." "From the time I was four I was taught at Broad Street that the church is not a building - it is a people. Then why all the money spent on us?...What really are the priorities?" The letter went on to document how much it costs simply to maintain the institution - no news to anyone who loves it - but then concludes -

"I am returning my pledge card - I will continue to make no specific pledge - this allows me the freedom to give as my heart tells me to..."

In some ways the letter was naive - in other ways it perfectly captured the agony of the contemporary church. It costs a lot of money to keep it going. Is it worth it? Does the church matter? It is not a new question. In fact, there simply is no end to the literature analyzing the health of the institutional church. Most of it is not very positive. With titles like "The Reality of the Gospel and the Unreality of the Churches", the most popular scholarship takes a very dismal view of the church. We are, in the eyes of many critics, irrelevant, unfaithful, idolatrous, and inefficient. We are captives of our culture, the paid lovers of a dying way of life, etc., etc., ad nauseum. Freud taught us that we spend most of our lives trying to resolve our relationship with our parents. I've often thought that the psychiatric dynamic applies to the church as well. It seems that one of the first independent conclusions young people establish is that the church is silly. At about the same time they conclude that their parents are obsolete. In the ordinary process of events they moderate the adolescent conclusion about the efficacy of parents. At fifteen or sixteen parents seem oppressive; at eighteen out of touch with reality; at twenty a menace to public safety; at twenty-two the certainty softens a bit and parents are tolerable and at least well-meaning; at twenty-four they appear to have been correct about some things; and by twenty-five most of us conclude that our parents were not only necessary, but probably the best people in the world to lead us into adulthood. That process of rehabilitation happens, naturally, almost inevitably, because the parental influence continues to have an impact on us. You simply can't get away from parents. But you can get away from church and most do and many live out the rest of life with a truncated, adolescent set of conclusions about Christian faith in general and the institutional church in particular.

This is a sermon about the Church. Actually it is the concluding one third of a sermon. The first part happened earlier when you and I together, as Church, administered the Sacrament of Holy Baptism to six infants. That was the church being the Church in the most universal way possible. For two thousand years we have been baptizing babies, affirming God's love for them and claiming God's promise in their behalf. We are never more "Church" than when we baptize babies. The second part of the sermon was the audio-visual presentation. You saw the record of how a particular church goes about being the Church, in ways that are concrete, tangible, and as relevant as a bag of groceries or a warm coat on a cold day. The third part of the sermon will be the talking part and to begin with I want to point to the calendar and the Bible.

This is Stewardship Dedication Sunday, as the letter writer warned. If you have not already done so, you are asked, during the offering today, to make a financial commitment on a pledge card for 1981. That act reflects your faith. Jesus talked about money more than He talked about love or sin or Heaven. He wasn't embarassed by money -

material goods - He never said it was bad. He didn't hesitate to suggest that the way one uses the resources at one's disposal is the most accurate reflector of what one believes. I read an offertory prayer a pastor used one Sunday as the plates were presented that simply tells it like it is: "Lord, no matter what we say or do, here is what we think of you. Amen." What we give reflects what we believe. But it is not entirely theological. It is also institutional. The money you give will, in fact, be used for salaries, and for utility bills. Your money will buy books for the church school and print bulletins, and provide insurance on the property. In addition to a sizable chunk for Church beyond our doors this operation is very institutional. It is important therefore to raise institutional type questions: for a moment, at least, to look at ourselves.

To help us start to do that I wish to point away from calendar to Bible. In the Bible you can find all sorts of theological rationales for the Church. In the very beginning God chooses people to be His people; elects them, as a people - a community, not on the basis of their moral purity or military prowess, but for reasons which remain rather obscure. These people live across the centuries as a witness to God's existence and will and sovereignty. If you want to talk about Church you have to hear the Bible persistently talking about chosen people, holy nation. Or, if you choose, you can let the Bible talk about Church as Body of Christ, or about Peter as the rock foundation of the church. What I want to point to this morning are two passages that tell us about the essential, God-intended nature of the Church.

First - the missionary society. "Go into all nations and make disciples," Matthew says Jesus said. Sometimes we have done that arrogantly. Sometimes our missionaries simply baptized the exploitive trade policies of the last century, and somehow invoked Jesus on the side of the companies which were taking resources from the people who were living on the land that contained them. Sometimes we even baptized human slavery as God-ordained and then tried to baptize the slaves in the name of Jesus. But sometimes, we followed Jesus, and witnessed in compassion and love and courage to the dignity of all people. And many times - all over the world - we died for that faith; in the Roman Coliseum, at the hands of the Inquisition, in the Boxer rebellion in China, in Russia, in Nazi concentration camps; enough times, in spite of our sin, to plant the Church in every land and every continent. The point is that we exist as Church for something else; namely, God's Kingdom on earth. We are a mission society and when we forget that fact, when we convince ourselves that what really matters is us - our strength, vitality and relevance instead of God's Kingdom, we have simply stopped being the Church of Jesus Christ

Second - our nature as Church has something to do with a physical reality in the world. The Kingdom is not a state of mind. It is a state of obedience to the King. And when that happens a new city emerges or comes down from God if you like that imagery better, as the writer of the visionary, cryptic essay that ends the Bible understood. The point is that this Christian Kingdom is not some ethereal abstraction, but a new arrangement in the present tense. Being the Church, if I read correctly, has to do not only with the roll being called up yonder - but the justice, peace, health of the city in which God has located the Church. And so the missionary society simply has to be a rather worldly missionary society which knows how to deal with the present tense as well as faun over the past and sing hymns about the future.

That's what being the Church is, then. Keeping those two ideas alive in an institution that often tries to forget them.It's easier, frankly, to live for ourselves - to build the Church and forget the mission. It's certainly easier to deal with "things of the spirit" instead of the city, possibility of salvation instead of justice. Jonathon Swift said one time,

"If Christianity were to be abolished, in time even the Church would suffer." That's the challenge, in every age and every place.

Does the Church matter? U.S.News and World Report listed twenty-four American Institutions in order of their perceived power and influence. The Church ranked twenty-third. In interviewing seminary students earlier this year I was astonished at how many of them had chosen to be clergy not only without parental support but in spite of rather pointed objections. And yet our past is well worth remembering. Even a superficial glance over the shoulder shows the Church as the mother of medical science: we invented hospitals. And the mother of education: from Harvard and Princeton to Wooster, Denison, Capital, Wittenberg, Otterbein, Weslayan, Dominican. And the mother of art and music. In short, while our sins are many, one cannot contemplate the highest and best of Western Civilization apart from the Church of Jesus Christ: from J.S.Bach to Albert Schweitzer, to Woodrow Wilson to Michaelangelo.

A journalist noted recently, "At its worst the Church is a puzzling irrelevance, but at its best it always perceives more than it can prove: yet being more than the sum of all its human parts, it continues to mediate the grace of God." (Sarah Cunningham, A.D., 10/1980, p.60).

To be the Church in the present and future is to be a worldly missionary society and that no longer means starting hospitals and colleges. The mission of Jesus Christ is different now. A clue to what it might be was reflected as the cross was raised in the Lenin Shipyard in Poland in a land where religion is regarded as the opiate of the people. The mission activity in the world may be to stand for the dignity and sanctity of human life, and against all human systems that deny that humanity. That's my guess at least and I say that knowing that a sizable percentage of the people don't understand that at all - that a self-designated Moral Majority seems willing, even anxious, to restrict freedom for parochial loyalties in the name of Christianity. I say that knowing that it's easy to applaud the strikers at a Communist shipyard but another thing entirely when the issue is the Church and a boycott in this country, or capital punishment, or right of choice. Those issues guarantee that the future for a Church interested in being faithful to Jesus Christ will be lively.

Does it matter? Does the Church really matter? We baptized half a dozen babies this morning as if it did. And part of what we brought to the Sacrament was the meaning of how the Church mattered to us over the years. The Church nurtured and stimulated us, and taught us some things about ourselves, and imparted to us everything we know about Jesus Christ and God and the meaning of our lives. One of our executives wrote it this way, in words anyone of us could affirm...

> "Thank you, Church of mine.
> You were my spiritual parent.
> You held me in your arms when I was too young to walk alone.
> You opened my mind to a universe of new ideas.
> You whispered quietly to me in my baptism,
> 'There is One who loves you very much.'" (Joreen Jarrell, A.D., 10/80, p.24).

Does the Church matter? The incarnation, our fundamental belief, that God Almighty took our flesh for our salvation is not only remembered and celebrated in the Church - it happens in and through the Church. We are the Body of Christ, the presence of God, in the city. We exist by His grace and mercy. Robert McCracken wrote one time that "in light of all its sins, and all the opposition to it over the centuries, the survival of the Church is one of the wonders of the world. Its continued existence and persistence for sixty generations is sheer miracle." (Questions People Ask, p.87). Sheer miracle, indeed. Sheer miracle wherever and whenever it exists. Of course it matters. To be a part of it, to be the Church of Jesus Christ is the greatest privilege of all. May you and I be worthy of it in this place - in our time. Amen.